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PRRC emerging trends

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Religious Research in the 1990s — Part I

Reported by Robert Wuthnow

Religion in America remains vital to our individual and collective well-being. But our religious institutions and our spiritual convictions are being tested as never before. New challenges arise with increasing rapidity as a result of the social changes in our society and the world.

As we enter the final years of the twentieth century, what are the issues that religious leaders need to consider? What are the gaps in our knowledge of American religion? How can researchers provide information on these crucial topics that will be of practical value?

To address these questions over 20 religious leaders and scholars gathered in Princeton in June 1990 for a symposium sponsored by the George H. Gallup International Institute with funding from the Lilly Endowment. A variety of denominations and faiths were represented by individuals who could draw upon their wide experience as clergy, researchers, educators, foundation executives and administrators. There was no preconceived agenda, only the admonition to identify significant issues in American religion toward which research might usefully be directed. Here is a summary of the most important recommendations in outline form.

A. The Meaning of the Church

1. What do people expect of the church?

- What do people think of the church?
- Why do people belong?
- What do they want the church to do for them?
- What are they willing to do for it?
- Is it meeting their needs?
- Should it be doing things differently?

These questions are timely because the shape of the church is undergoing important change. Denominationalism is not as significant as it used to be. Denominational leaders are struggling to redefine their identity. New religious organizations have sprung up. Television ministries have reshaped the public perception of religion. The authority of clergy appears to be in crisis.

We are guessing that many people feel their churches are in decline. Have they lowered their expectations? Have they turned increasingly to secular institutions for their cues? Have they become cynical? Have they decided to work less hard—or—harder for the church?

It would be valuable to focus some attention on the positive aspects of the church, rather than deal continuously with church decline. Where are the pockets of vitality? What hopes do people have for their churches? In what ways have they especially been blessed and ministered to? Surely, research could give encouragement to the beleaguered clergy and laity who are most committed to the church.

We should know more about how church people define success and failure. In some quarters, particularly those that are growing, numeric success seems to be the dominant criterion. But perhaps it is a sign of success if an institution can be allowed to die, because failure may mean selling out to secular standards, even if numeric increase is the result.

What is the relationship between our expectations of the church and our expectations of ourselves? When people expect less of the church, do they also expect less of themselves? And vice versa? Or has religion ceased to be a vital element when we define our roles in life?

2. What can be done to improve "faith literacy"?

We know that biblical knowledge is often embarassingly weak in our society. In the past, biblical knowledge has risen with higher levels of education, but among young people today, the better educated are often as biblically illiterate as the less well educated.

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According to publishing reports, religious books are selling in record numbers, but what is the public learning from these books? Self help? Good feelings? Comfort? Or are people being challenged ethically, morally and theologically by contemporary religious writers?

In the past, people looked to their clergy, to sermons, to Sunday School classes and to bible studies for religious knowledge. All these media still exist, but increasingly it is likely that images of Moses are shaped by the movies, images of church by televangelism, and of morality by the newspapers and public affairs. No longer do we partake of denominational tradition or systematic theology or even a comprehensive approach to the Bible.

Perhaps there are many people in our society who understand forgiveness and redemption and transcendence intuitively, but without conceptual knowledge, can their faith remain strong? Can they transmit it to their children?

3. How are women changing the church?

While much attention has been given to the question of women's ordination and some research has been directed towards the implications for the church of women's changing role in the labor force and the family, other important issues remain unexamined.

- What is the nature of the so-called "shadow leadership" of women in the Roman Catholic church?
- How are women clergy and theologians affecting the way in which religion is done?
- What is the relation between the feminization of American religion and its apparent turn toward the therapeutic?
- As we rethink gender issues, what do we discover about the relation between nurturance and religious leadership?

4. What are the major future challenges facing the church?

What different perspectives do clergy, laity, nonmembers and religious elites have upon the future of the church? What do they think the most important religious issues will be? What changes do they envision in religious institutions? What social conditions are going to present new needs to the church? How can these needs be met? In short, what will the church look like in the 21st century?

B. The Quest for Community

1. Support Groups

Anecdotal evidence suggests that interest in prayer fellowships, Bible study groups, and twelve-step groups is on the rise. Small groups have probably been a major source of religious vitality throughout our nation's history, but we know little about this important phenomenon.

We need descriptive data? how many people are involved? In what kinds of groups? Why? What do they get out of it? What sorts of caring and sharing happens in these groups?

Evaluative data also are needed? Which become closed and stale? Which remain open and dynamic? Do they impose group authority on the individual? Do they enhance moral decision-making? Do participants feel better about themselves? Are they more concerned with selves or others? Do they reinforce denominational particularism or break it down? Are they revitalizing the church or competing with it?

2. How does community facilitate spiritual formation?

Individuality has dominated religious education. Each parishioner sits quietly in the pew and listens to the sermon, goes home and studies God's Word in private. What this model lacks is the give-and-take that makes learning dynamic, practical and consequential. In community, the individual has a crucible for trying out new behavior and seeing it modeled in others.

Clergy have been mindful that collective decisions through Bible study groups, class meetings and retreats can model good behavior for the individual as well. Research on spiritual formation should include this community dimension. Questions should be asked about the contexts in which learning takes place, the role of supportive others, and the dynamic interaction between conceptual knowledge and practical living.

3. What should churches be doing in urban communities?

Recent studies have focussed comfortably on the comfortable middle-class suburban milieu—what one symposium member called the new WASPs: White Arrogant Suburban Protestants. The gulf between this group and many who live in our nation's large cities is immense. The problems of the disadvantaged will be addressed later, but here are some additional concerns:

- In culturally diverse communities how can churches and religious leaders create innovative alliances to share information and other resources without destroying their own distinctive traditions?
- When a city becomes a jungle, can churches function as alternative "countercultures"?
- When parks are taken over by drug pushers and streets by antiseptic shopping malls, can church facilities be used as needed public meeting places?
- What can churches and business leaders do together in cities to make life more liveable? Should they work together through voluntary efforts or through the political system?

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More People Now Believe in Heaven and Hell

Belief in both heaven and hell have reached new peaks among the American public. In 1990, over three people in four (78%) said they believed there is a heaven where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded. According to six persons in 10 (60%) there also is a hell where those who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally damned. Previous records in these beliefs occurred in 1952 when 72% said there is a heaven, and 58% that there is a hell.

Most likely to believe in heaven are women, blacks, adults under age 30, evangelicals, and church members. These also are the same people who tend to believe in eternal damnation, with the exception that men and women are about equal in this respect.

Three in four of those who believe in heaven expect to go there, including 29% who say their chances of doing so are excellent and 49% who feel they are good. Among the remaining believers 17% say their expectations are just fair, and 3% feel their chances are poor, and 2% are undecided. Most evangelicals (91%) rate their likelihood of going to heaven as excellent or good.

Very few believers in hell say there is either an excellent (2%) or good chance (2%) they will go there. There is a fair chance in the opinion of 15% of the believers, but 77% maintain the likelihood of eternal damnation is poor. Undecided on the matter are 2% of the believers. Those who have no religion (9%) and who do not belong to the church (7%) are most concerned about going to hell.

The most recent findings are based on 1,108 interviews conducted by Gallup in November 1990.

The Lord and Satan vying for the soul of man, who is navigating the ocean of vices and sin. From *Le grant Kalendrier et compost des Bergiers*, printed by Nicolas Le Rouge, Troyes, 1496.

Trends in Belief

	Heaven	Hell
1990	78%	60%
1981	71	53
1965	68	54
1952	72	58

Believers in 1990

	Heaven	Hell
Total	78%	60%
Men	74	59
Women	81	61
Ages 18–29	84	71
30–49	78	61
50 & older	74	54
Protestant	84	66
Catholic	81	57
Evangelical	91	80
No religion	46	36
Church member	87	67
Non-member	62	48

Excellent or Good Chance of Going to ...

	Heaven	Hell
Total	78%	4%
Men	73	5
Women	81	3
Ages 18–29	78	3
30–49	80	3
50 & older	76	5
Protestant	80	4
Catholic	76	5
Evangelical	88	3
No religion	61	9
Church member	83	3
Non-member	65	7

THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

This valuable resource provides a compilation of key Gallup findings and trends on Bible reading and attitudes towards the Bible for both adults and teen-agers over the years.

The Role of the Bible in American Society by George Gallup, Jr. and Robert Bezilla, was developed to help celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of National Bible Week. It presents measurements and trends on the following important facts and issues:

— What are people's basic beliefs about the Bible? Do they think it should be interpreted as the literal Word of God, as the inspired Word, or as the ancient writings of man only?

— How often do adults and teen-agers read the Bible? Are they reading it more often or less often than in past decades?

— How much of the Old Testament and New Testament have young and older readers actually studied?

— Who studies the Bible? Do children want Bible studies? Are we in danger of becoming a nation of Biblical illiterates?

— Does the public endorse Constitutionally approved use of the Bible in the public schools? How is it now being used in local community schools throughout the country?

Profiles for the findings for all of these questions are provided and placed within the historical context of 50 years' research on biblical reading behavior and attitudes. This comprehensive view provides valuable information not only about what progress has been made in Bible reading, but where further work is needed.

The report is available for $9.95, including postage and handling. Copies may be ordered by telephone (609) 921-8112 or by mailing your request and payment to The Princeton Religion Research Center, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542.

Religion Triumphs Over Atheism in Eastern Europe

Religious belief in Eastern Europe has persisted at high levels despite nearly a half century of suppression. Resisting aggressive official policies and indoctrination in atheism, the level of those professing not to believe in God has remained small. For most measures there is little apparent difference in religious attitudes and behavior between Eastern and Western Europeans.

These findings emerged from Gallup surveys conducted in Czechoslovakia and Hungary in late 1989 and in Lithuania in 1990. Gordon Heald, managing director of the Gallup Poll in Great Britain, provided the survey results at a recent seminar sponsored by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

The surveys show that from four to five persons in 10 in each of the countries and groups surveyed describe themselves as "religious persons." In Lithuania, 45% of ethnic Lithuanians describe themselves this way, and 50% non-ethnic Lithuanians consider themselves to be religious persons. Comparable self-descriptions were given by 56% of the Hungarians, and by 49% of the Czechoslovakians interviewed on the surveys. There is a considerable religious gap between Czechs and Slovaks, with 69% of Slovaks saying they are religious persons, compared to 38% of the Czechs. The Eastern Europeans are in the middle of the religious spectrum in comparison to the West, where between 62% of Western Europeans and 46% of Scandinavians consider themselves to be religious persons. By comparison, 81% of Americans describe themselves as religious persons.

Despite the aggressive espousal of atheism under communist rule, there is actually a lower percentage of "convinced atheists" in Lithuania than in many Western European countries. Just 2 percent of ethnic Lithuanians and 4 percent of other Lithuanians say they are convinced atheists. The average for Western Europe is 5 percent, ranging from 1 percent in Ireland, 3 percent in West Germany and Scandinavia, 4 percent each in Great Britain, Italy and Spain to a high of 10 percent in France. In the United States, 5% of Americans say they do not believe in God.

Weekly church attendance for the Eastern Europeans appears to be remarkably high when the comparative scarcity of places of worship and clergy are considered, not to mention frequent official discouragement of attendance in the past. Attending at least once a week now are 17% of Czechoslovaks, 15% of ethnic Lithuanians, 12% of other Lithuanians, and 13% of Hungarians.

In the Hungarian study, the people of that country average 4.8 in rating the importance of God in their lives, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means one does not consider God at all important and 10 means God is believed to be of paramount importance. This is a lower rating than found in most Western European countries and the United States, but still higher than the average ratings in Denmark, France and Sweden.

A high proportion of the people of Czechoslovakia and Hungary have been baptized. Two in three Czechoslovaks (66%) were baptized as Catholics, 10% in Protestant denominations, 1% Orthodox, and 1% in another faith. Only 19% were not baptized, and 3% are unaware if they had been baptized. Seven in 10 Hungarians (71%) were baptized as Catholics, 22% Reformed Church, and 4% Lutheran. Only 1% said they were never baptized, and 2% did not know if they had been.

The findings for each question are based on probability samples of at least 1,000 interviews conducted in each country in 1989 and 1990.

Consider Selves Religious Persons

Italy	83%
United States	81
Ireland	64
Spain	63
Great Britain	58
West Germany	58
Hungary	56
France	51
Other Lithuanians	50
Ethnic Lithuanians	45
Czechoslovakia	49
Slovaks only	69
Czechs only	38
Scandinavia	46

Attend Church At Least Weekly

Ireland	82%
United States	43
Spain	41
Italy	36
West Germany	21
Czechoslovakia	17
Ethnic Lithuanians	15
Other Lithuanians	12
Great Britain	14
Hungary	13
France	12
Scandinavia	5

Average Ratings of Importance of God in One's Life

United States	8.2
Republic of Ireland	8.0
Northern Ireland	7.5
Italy	6.9
Spain	6.4
Finland	6.2
Belgium	5.9
Great Britain	5.7
West Germany	5.7
Norway	5.4
Netherlands	5.3
Hungary	4.8
France	4.7
Denmark	4.4

"Organized Religion" Leaders Do Not Always Inspire Confidence

NEW YORK—Only one person in five (20%) expresses a "great deal" of confidence in the "people in charge of running ... organized religion," according to a Harris Poll taken in November 1990. This places organized religion in seventh place, behind other U.S. institutions such as the military, medicine, colleges and universities, the U.S. Supreme Court, television news, and the White House.

This finding, when contrasted with a Gallup Poll during the same period, points up an important difference in how people view the institution of the church and its leadership. In the Gallup Poll respondents are not asked about the leadership of organized religion but about "the church or organized religion." On this institutional basis, 33% of the adults interviewed in 1990 expressed a "great deal" of confidence, second only to the military among the institutions tested on the survey.

Both question wordings are equally valid, and their comparison yields insight to how the public may distinguish between institutions and their leadership.

Great deal of confidence in ...

	Church (Gallup)	Leadership (Harris)
1990	33%	20%
1989	30	16
1984	41	24
1981	30	22
1977	38	29

The illuminated capital letters in this month's issue were created in America in the twentieth century. The style is called "Cloister."

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